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What Kind of Mourning?

Autoethnographic Fragments

Jonathan Wyatt

Abstract This paper continues the author's exploration of the experience of mourning his late father, following three earlier papers on the same theme. The impulse to write into the experience of loss, to tell in writing his father's stories, is interrogated through the narrating of such accounts and the questioning of this process in light of ideas about both the 'normal' progress of bereavement and meanings of loss.

A response to Hélène Cixous

It's very nearly the end. It's very nearly life.

Extend the hand, write, and it's all over with the end. (Cixous, 2005, p.97)

Extend the hand, write, and it's all over with the end.

If it was all over back then,

When I wrote,

When I saw my handwriting stare back,

When I felt my fingers against the keys and saw the text appear;

If it was all over then,

Why, now,

As I write again,

Do my eyes blink back against the tears?

If it was all over then,

When I closed the cover and walked away,

When I gave the printed pages to others,

When I let the writing go,

Saw it fly away;

Why, if it was all over then,

Do I now experience the rising impulse to weep?

Extend the hand, write, and it's all over with the end?

If it is all over,
It is only so for as long as it takes me to notice.

If it's all over with the end,
It would be the end:
I would have nothing left to write.

Extend the hand, write.
Keep writing.

Final ritual: A vignette in the third person

He lies unconscious in the hospital bed. It is morning. Nicola and I are 'getting him up,' she washing him and straightening his bedclothes, having delegated to me the task of shaving him.

I notice how surprising I find it that, even at the end of life, such processes as hair growth do not seem to slow.

He uses a brush and cream to generate lather. He has always done so, and I have never. I am in a lather of my own, struggling to create enough soap and then managing to apply it not only to the beginnings of his beard but also to his nose, ears, hair and neck. He breathes on, slowly and rhythmically, seemingly oblivious to the mess I make. My sister laughs at my attempts.

I feel the razor scratch against the bristles on his face.

Writing and mourning: Thinking aloud in the second person

It is nearly Christmas, 2007. December 8th. A Saturday.

Four years, two months and twenty-one days.

I have been writing about you all this time. Three papers, many stories (Wyatt, 2005, 2006, 2008). In the first two papers, I was writing into the experience of losing you: that event. 18 September 2003. That bright, beautiful September day. (Today, it rains and rains. Cars park in deep puddles; rivers in southern England flood again.)

And then, in the third, I stuttered with Deleuze into the agony of your fading, the starkness of your absence. The impact, perhaps, of beginning to register your being truly lost.

Here I am again. I aspire to stutter in this writing too, to allow "language as such to stutter" (Deleuze, 1994, p.23).

I told Mum and Nicola that I had returned to writing about you. We were outside

a hotel on the Isle of Wight, Tennyson Down behind us, another Saturday morning. (You'd have liked being there. You could have sat with your face to the sun, the sea nearby.) I had barely finished the sentence — "I'm writing about Dad again" — when Nicola responded, "Why don't you leave him alone? Poor man." We all laughed.

Why not leave you alone? I don't yet know.

All I know is that I can't stop. I feel impelled.

I am confused: Although that day is long gone and although your absence pains me, when I write 'you' I have energy. I mourn your loss, but in doing so I find hope. I mourn — there is mourning at the heart of being (Krell, 2000) — but when I write I sense you.

I am with Speedy (Speedy et al., 2005) in wanting to trouble the received wisdom about bereavement. My continuing need and desire to, and love of, telling stories about you does not feel pathological. I do not feel stuck at a particular 'stage' of a bereavement process (e.g., Kubler-Ross, 1970; Parkes, 1972). I feel continuing pain at your loss. I am disturbed by the still-growing and sometimes shocking awareness both of your absence and the knowledge that I shall never again see you. Perhaps I too am at risk of "failing to come to terms with things" (Speedy et al., 2005), but I also write out of and into laughter and hope. I write myself into a new relationship with you.

I am undertaking a task that will never be 'complete'. I do not want it to be. Time does not make your loss easier. The 'healthy' outcome of mourning does not seem to me to be in relinquishing you — whatever I might mean by 'you' — over time (Abraham & Torok, 1994; Freud, 1917). If the work of mourning is successfully to *interiorise* the lost object (Freud, 1917), such a process seems impossible because of the "assumption of a topology with limits between inside and out, what is ours and what is the other" (Brialet and Naas, in Derrida, 2003, p.11). The distinction between me and you was never, and is not now, neat. Death brings into focus that you are "something outside of (me) within (me)" (Derrida, 1989, p.34). Like Derrida, writing of/to Althusser, I say to you: "(Y)ou are at once too absent and too close: in me, inside me." (Derrida, 2003, p.114). I write (to) you both to get some distance from you, to see you on the page, to get you out of my head, and to draw you to me, to try to hold you. I write you here, in this A4 book on a grey winter's day, to work at giving birth to you. All work, perhaps, works at mourning (Derrida, 2003) "even and especially when it plans to bring something to light and let it be seen." (ibid., p.142/3). I tell stories of you, not only to myself but to others, so that they can give birth to you in their imaginations and let me know, in their faces, in their bodies, in their words.

When I write, I sense you. I sense your body: tall, just short of my height (as I took delight in reminding you); short, thick hair, greying as the years passed, becoming, as Mum would say, "*très distingués*".

When I write, I see your regular face, your neat nose and cleft chin. (My face is long and narrow. I have the cleft chin. A kind adjective for my nose would be 'strong.' As a schoolteacher, cheeky students would ask me to turn away from the window because my nose's shadow was darkening the room.)

I sense your walking: stick in left hand, right hand on right thigh, so that as your weight comes fleetingly onto your right leg you can hold it steady. I thought about your walking earlier this week, as I wandered through Oxford. I imagined how it must have been for you not to have that leg functioning. My right leg is weaker. I have no power in my right-footed shot. Never have. But the difference between them is only trivial, and if I had practised more . . . I have no idea how it was for you. I can't imagine it.

I sense your voice: not deep, but strong. Its tenor clarity. And your singing voice, that you playfully raised to be heard above others at the end of hymns, harmonising the final phrase.

But now I am repeating myself. I am going over old ground.

Why can I not leave you alone? Why can I not (let you) rest in peace?

Simon is sure he will see you again. He believes that there is a heaven. Mum believes this too. Nicola? I don't know. I do not believe I will see you again, and I am not sure that I want to. Could I bear an eternity with you? Could any of us bear eternity with anyone? This, here, now, writing, is another life with you: writing, I see you, even if only hazily. Through a glass, darkly (1 Corinthians, 13).

Have I become, in Richardson's words, your "writing vulture," picking over your bones (Richardson, 2007, p. 57)? Do I strip away what remains of you as I write? Am I merely using you for my own ends?

No. I do not think so.

I am breathing. It is writing I need to do; writing and performing, telling y/our stories. I feel alive when I write and I feel alive when I perform you to others.

I must write about you. I have to. It is a calling, perhaps. Your story calls me. In so doing, if you stay — become — alive to me and become alive to others, does that make this calling worthy? I have to write into your absence, to keep on, keep on writing. It is a quest, one that may be doomed to failure because, as Cixous says, of the impossibility of writing 'you':

I do not know how to speak of you without losing proximity. But I do not know how to not speak of you without giving up an approach . . . I do not have the courage not to write: I write to you, I write myself to you, I fail, but at least it is to your address. (Cixous, 1994, p. 99–100)

I will write myself to you, and fail. I will try, keep on trying. Today, I think it worth the attempt.

And worthy of you.

Fragments: The rhythm of you and me

We sat at table and you said to us, your three children, *apropos* of nothing in particular, “I wonder if you’ll remember me when I’m dead and gone.” You regularly, though not frequently, used to talk like this.

For example:

[illegible]

In due passage of time you terrified and delighted your grandchildren with the same performance.

And I write, story after story. I dread their ceasing but they keep on coming. My anxiety does not stem their flow. I do not forget.

You used to sing duets with your brother to those queuing outside London's Duke of York theatre. You busked, you and Neville; Neville, who, in the family mythology, was handsome and played beautiful piano. Uncle Neville, who died when I was small, before I had the chance to remember him. What was it you sang to the queuing public? The Battle Eve? ("Dark the shades of night are growing/Keen and chill the wind is blowing.") No, it would have been more cheerful than that. The Girl and the Duck? ("Quack, quack, said the duck, quack quack/And quack said the other ducks too"). Yes, that one, probably. Light, funny.

We three sang these same songs to residents in old people's homes in our teens. Nicola and I still break into The Girl and the Duck occasionally, when we have an audience. Simon and I sang together often, and performed at his wedding an altered version of Clementine with lyrics you found funny.

You drank coffee, one a day, scalding. It was on the table and then gone. And, teasing, you would say it had been barely lukewarm.

I drink coffee, one a day, savouring it, enjoying its bitterness. I take my time, make it last. And then it's gone.

We piled on you at weekends, you squatting on the floor, each of us charging at you from different directions. I would run, leap, and land on your shoulders whilst you had Nicola locked in one arm and Simon on your lap as you tickled him into submission with the other. You never once complained about being hurt by us, however unrestrained we were in our attacks. You always won. Occasionally, one of us would land on the spectacles that you had carefully placed out of the way, and that would signal the end.

I bundled my two, mostly one at a time, occasionally together, flinching as stray feet jabbed me. I never managed to get Holly to submit. Was there something wrong with my technique?

You visited me on your own once when I was at boarding school. I must have been about ten. I had not seen you for six weeks. You took me out for the day. I don't remember where. When the time came to drop me back at school, I lay my head on your lap. You said, "Come on, Titch. I know it's hard. But you've got to go."

I saw my boy off to school each morning, knowing that every day was hard. I felt powerless. I could not make it good for him.

Work to you was a chore, a daily grind of crowded trains, long hours, and responsibility. It was an assault upon your being, a working life that, post polio, you fell into as the disease ravaged not only your nerve endings but also your self-esteem. You could have taken up the place held for you at Cambridge but you chose not to.

You never wanted to talk about work. We rarely met colleagues. They never became friends. It was a door that you closed.

You used to catch early trains so that you could find a seat. A later train and you had the embarrassment of others standing to offer you their seats. I travelled to London with you once, sat with you as other be-suited men nodded to you, said hello, but did not converse. You and I said farewell on the Tube, as you headed to the bank and I travelled north back to university.

I love my work, most days. You have taught me to do that, to find something that I want to do, to put that above other criteria. Never do a job that means you have to commute into London, you said. My journey, on bus and foot, involves standing in crowds but I do not mind. It takes me half an hour on a good day.

Favourite lines (1)

You had lines for most occasions (see Wyatt, 2005). You loved their sound.

*What is this life if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare?*

William Henry Davies

Any wistful moment would prompt this one: a pause in conversation, perhaps, or passing a man gazing across the sea towards the horizon.

*What is this life if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare?*

Yet you never lingered over the beauty of paintings, or the 'beautiful views' that Mum so loves.

At what did you stand and stare?

Favourite lines (2)

Oh, the never-ending tale of mortal malady

You recited this after brief conversations about your health. People would ask, "How are you, Paul?" and you would force a convincing smile and say, "Me? Oh, I'm lovely, thank you." They would laugh, surprised (unless they knew you well and expected this stock, obfuscatory response) and be none the wiser. Later, when Mum asked you why you did not reply more straightforwardly, you would say that illness is dull, and quote this line.

Oh, the never-ending tale of mortal malady

I heard you say this line well before your long, final illness. You knew it from the time of your polio, I imagine.

I can find no author. Maybe it was yours.

Favourite lines (3 and 4): you and me, again

What demi-god hath come so near creation?

Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

And

The visible personification of absolute perfection

Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*

After bathing and shaving you would use these interchangeably as you preened in the mirror; sometimes you would accompany them with mock body-building poses.

I get a line from you: "I must go. It is done" (Macbeth). It comes to me when I say goodbye to my family. Or I might say:

*Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table*

T.S. Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*

I pause after 'sky,' trying to build up to the shock of the next line. But no one appreciates it. These days, Joe and Holly silence me by the end of the first.

I have no other lines that I recite.

I just write.

Car trouble

Once, before I was allowed to drive, I decided that it was time to get in some practice. From what I remember, Nicola, who strongly denies this, egged me on and sat in the car with me. The car was parked quietly at the top of the drive.

Your car, your old, grey Cortina: red plastic seats, your lucky dog hanging from the mirror, a St Christopher coin stuck to the dashboard.

Your car, Poomph. One of several generations of Poomphs. (An earlier generation—the first that I remember—was a Morris Minor convertible. On Saturday mornings we would go to the shops for odds and ends and, most importantly, sweets, the three of us on the tops of the back seats, wind in our hair, singing.) I gripped the steering wheel. Nicola showed me how to find reverse so that we could back slowly down the drive. Engine on, foot on the accelerator. More, she said. Poomph careered backwards, Nicola shouting. The driver's door flew open just before we passed the first tree. We heard the tearing of hinges as the door was forced back. Poomph, wisely, had had enough and halted.

When you returned home that evening I waited until you had sat down, had changed out of your suit and had whisky in your hand.

You, me, and baboons

A story from when I was an English teacher, over twenty years ago. I never told you this.

My favourite lesson was found poetry. ("Found' poetry?" you'd have asked, sceptically.) It worked with all ages, but the younger ones, the eleven-year-olds, seemed to enjoy it most:

It's a Wednesday afternoon in Washington, near Sunderland. I stand in front of thirty students. They are tired, worn out from lunchtime arguments, clubs, scraps and football. This lesson is the worst lesson of the day. From my classroom window, across the concrete and tarmac of the school campus, I can see Penshaw Monument in the distance, a Greek temple bizarrely perched on a bleak, inauspicious, north-eastern hill.¹ One student, Darren, constantly tells me how much he hates it. I don't hate it. It makes me smile; I associate it with being here in this room with the messy, enthralling, anxious energy of adolescents.

"OK, folks, let's start. We're doing something different today. It's poetry, and it's going to surprise you."

Groans. They don't believe me.

"We are going to tell each other stories—about anything, it doesn't matter. While you're listening I want you to jot down any phrases—groups of words, long and short—that catch your attention, that catch your ear. So, when I just said, "catch your ear", that's a phrase, you could write that down—

"Sir, here, have this!" Paul calls, reaching for his ear, making a ripping sound, and motioning a throw towards me. I reach up, 'catch' the 'ear', and start eating it.

"Ugh, sir! That's disgusting."

"Go on, you can start from now, as I'm talking. Write these phrases down at angles on your pages. Scatter them. Don't write them as a list. I'll tell you what we'll do with them later."

There's some shuffling, people still finding pens, but most have started jotting.

"OK? I'll start. I'll tell you a story from when I was little."

They're settled.

"You see, the thing is, I could have been Tarzan."

Jeers.

"Yes, it's true. You see, when I was a baby we lived in East Africa. My father had a job out in Kenya. One day, when I was only a few weeks old we went to a safari park for the day to see the animals. My dad was driving, my mum next to him in the front, my older brother and sister on the back seat. I was in my carry-cot in the boot."

A hand goes up. "Yes, Vanessa."

"Did they always put you in the boot, sir?"

"Yeah, with the luggage, sir", adds Paul.

"With the dogs, more like," says Darren.

"Are you writing down these phrases, everyone? Like 'with the dogs, more like'—they're all good for what we'll do later. Yes, it was an estate car, and we had a dog, though I don't think she was with us at the time, and that's where I was. So,

we're driving along, slowly, creeping forwards so as not to disturb animals, and the baboons — they're very cheeky — like to come and sit on cars because of the warmth of the engine. They like to warm themselves."

"You mean, they like to warm their butts, sir!"

"Yes. Thank you, Paul."

There is feverish scribbling.

"There we were, edging along, a load of baboons on the bonnet. I'm quietly asleep, in my nappy, minding my own business, in the boot of the car. A couple of the baboons, the bold ones, scamper up the windscreen onto the roof and along the top. One of them drops over so he's now standing on the boot handle. Now, it was one of those handles where, if you apply enough downward pressure, the catch goes and the boot can open. Baboons can be big, quite heavy, so this baboon is standing on the handle, the catch goes and the baboon, startled, jumps back onto the roof and the boot springs open. I'm there, ready to be whisked away and taken off by baboons. The two on the roof are peering over and looking at me but, luckily, my dad puts his foot down suddenly on the accelerator, the baboons fly off and I'm saved."

"Nah, sir, you're having us on."

"No, honestly," I insist, "that's what they tell me happened. That's how it was. If it hadn't have been for my father I wouldn't be here."

"Sir, shame they didn't get you then!" Laughter all round, and Vanessa is triumphant.

I smile at her. "Ha ha, Vanessa. Now, who else has a story to tell? And keep on writing those phrases down — 'shame they didn't get you' — that's a good one."

"Sir, I've got a story, sir. It's about my dad, a top and an omelette."

The stories continue, one spinning off the other, and the phrases that are recorded become, after an hour, surreal, funny, sometimes profound poems, proudly and collectively written by small groups of students.

There might have been one like this:

I keep writing down what I hear
I am ready to be whisked away

I keep writing down what I hear
And I gradually edge forwards

I think,
If I keep writing,
If I keep applying enough pressure,
I might get taken

By dogs
 Or baboons
 Or others who have a story to tell

They're all good for what I'll do later.

I keep writing down what I hear,
 Because of the warmth
 Because of the laughter
 Because, otherwise, I wouldn't be here.

I keep writing down what I hear
 So you don't get whisked away,
 Or before you put your foot down and ask,
 Who else has a story to tell?

You, me and God

When I had faith as a young man, I called my God, "Father." I used to talk to him, intimately. I felt him. I sensed him. I felt his care for me, his concern for my best interests, his strength, his love, his anger. At 24, after three years of gradual distancing, I stopped speaking to him. I still thought about him, and saw my new relationship with the universe as more real, more authentic. But I had lost him. There is no denying this loss, and I still mourn him.

You came to believe in your God more strongly, more clearly, it seemed, just as I was losing mine. We spoke about faith. I picked up that you never understood, but then nor did I at the time. I know my loss of faith saddened you. It was something significant that we no longer shared and we struggled to communicate about it, especially in later years. These days I think that, maybe, writing has become my god: "Writing is God. But it is not your God" (Cixous, 1991, p.11). I am called to write you, impossibly, and it fills me with hope, with loss, with presence and with love. I have left work briefly to write this; I sit in this café, writing, and I feel my tension ease.

Writing may be prayer, not 'God'; an exercise of faith, as I write into the dark with an audience I am unable to see (Gale, Pelias, Russell, Spry, & Wyatt, 2008).

What kind of mourning?

My question begs an answer that I do not have. I write. That is all I know. I write in search of understanding. I write as inquiry (see Richardson, 1997, 2000, 2001; Rich-

ardson & St Pierre, 2005, etc.). As inquiry into loss. Writing-mourning. Grieving in text.

I am (being) changed by your loss. I write, perhaps, in order to keep working at that change, in order to attempt to fathom the mystery.

Perhaps...one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly for ever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say submitting to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance. There is losing, as we know, but here is also the transformative effect of loss, and this latter cannot be charted or planned. (Butler, 2004, p.21)

I think I understand: I write in order to inquire, not into the loss of 'you,' but into the change in me that your undeniable physical, literal, material, bodily death is effecting. I write, I tell my stories of you, not because of your 'absence' but because your new, becoming presence makes demands upon me. In writing you, I (re)write myself (Richardson, 1997). You are asking questions of me. I hear you say: "What now, Titch? Where will your experience of losing— and gaining — me take you?"

What kind of mourning? This is why there is laughter and hope when I write. This is why I come alive: this writing takes me into mystery. I do not know what I have lost in losing you (Freud, 1917), what it is in you, exactly, that I have lost, and you are calling me to search my own inscrutability (Butler, 2004). I am undone by you (Butler, 2004), and, through writing, I nurture my undoing.

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Note

1. The monument was built in 1844 in honour of John George Lambton, the first Earl of Durham. The Monument stands 136 metres above sea level. It was designed to be a copy of the Theseion, the Temple of Hephaestus, in Athens.

About the Author

Jonathan Wyatt is head of professional development at the University of Oxford and works as a counsellor in the UK's National Health Service. His research interests lie in the areas of: loss; writing and collaborative writing; poststructural thinking and how it relates to psychodynamic theory; professional experience; and the 'felting' between all of these. He can be contacted via email — jonathan.wyatt@learning.ox.ac.uk

